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Letter dated 14 March 2008 from the Permanent Representative of China to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the honour to transmit herewith the Beijing Statement on Combating Desertification and Promoting Sustainable Development (see annex I) and the report of the International Conference on Combating Desertification (see annex II), which were adopted at the International Conference on Combating Desertification, held in Beijing, from 22 to 24 January 2008.

I should be grateful if you would have the present letter and its annexes circulated as a document of the sixteenth session of the Commission on Sustainable Development.

(*Signed*) **Wang** Guangya
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to the United Nations

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Annex I to the letter dated 14 March 2008 from the Permanent Representative of China to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

Beijing Statement on Combating Desertification and Promoting Sustainable Development

(24 January 2008)

The State Forestry Administration of the People's Republic of China and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, with the support of the secretariat of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification and other United Nations organizations, jointly organized the International Conference on Combating Desertification, in Beijing, from 22-24 January 2008, where representatives of Governments, organizations of the United Nations system and other international and regional institutions, as well as major groups, held interactive discussions on the global challenges of desertification and measures to combat it. Key points highlighted during the presentations include the following:

Global dimension of desertification

Desertification is a global issue, with serious implications for worldwide eco-safety, food security, socio-economic stability, and sustainable development. Among the most affected countries are the least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small island developing States, which are faced with serious difficulties in combating desertification and land degradation and meeting the Millennium Development Goals.

Desertification-poverty nexus in developing countries

The high level of rural poverty in many developing countries, particularly in Africa, continues to be among the most serious constraints to progress in combating desertification and land degradation. At the same time, desertification and land degradation exacerbate rural poverty in affected developing countries.

Alternative livelihoods that provide income-generating opportunities can help reduce the pressure on land and ecosystems and alleviate poverty.

Strengthening synergies to support implementation

The 10-year strategic plan and framework adopted at the eighth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification has strengthened the commitment of the international community to implement the Convention at all levels. It enables the Convention to be more broadly engaged on the frontline of combating desertification and land degradation, mitigating the effects of drought, as well as contributing to combating climate change. In this respect, the United Nations Convention serves as a platform for adaptation to climate change, mitigation and resilience.

Strengthening synergies among the three Rio conventions — United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Biological Diversity — is strongly

encouraged to enhance coordination of actions and opportunities for mutual benefits in combating desertification, preserving dryland ecosystems, conserving wetlands, and combating climate change.

Forests play an important role in both preventing desertification and land degradation as well as in rehabilitating degraded lands. The implementation of the "Non-legally binding instrument on all types of forests" adopted by the General Assembly in 2007 in its resolution 62/98 provides a framework for advancing sustainable forest management and its contribution to combating desertification, mitigating climate change and preserving forest biological diversity.

Integration of action programmes to combat desertification into development frameworks

National action programmes are practical tools in combating desertification and implementing the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification. Given that desertification reaches across sectors, it is essential to ensure coordination among all relevant government agencies at the central and local levels in the implementation of national action plans, with the active involvement of civil society. It is therefore important to mainstream national action plans in national sustainable development strategies and poverty reduction plans.

Strengthening support by the international community through bilateral, regional and subregional cooperation will remain crucial for implementing action programmes to combat desertification and land degradation.

National action plan implementation should be based on integrated approaches and supported by legislation.

It is essential to improve the mode of economic growth and means of production and consumption to achieve harmony between conservation and development, as well as balance between economic and social benefits.

Participation of local communities

Participation of local communities in combating desertification is essential. Partnerships and strategic alliances are important institutional frameworks for programme and project implementation at the community level.

Market access

Ensuring more equitable access of farmers to regional and global markets and providing practical help and capacity-building to these stakeholders in marketing agricultural products is essential to their willingness to invest in long-term sustainable land management since they would be able to reap the future rewards of such investment.

Investment and resources mobilization

Combating desertification and land degradation requires large and long-term investments that are difficult to mobilize from central and local government budgets alone. It also requires providing economic and non-economic incentives to stakeholders, including small-scale land users, to invest in the sustainable management of land, forests and other natural resources. Such incentives may

include, among others, establishing tenure security and access rights to land, water and forests, facilitating access to credits and technology, including information technology, at favourable terms, improving early warning and information exchange on desertification and drought, and capacity-building.

International development cooperation can play a critical role in mobilizing resources, including official development assistance, in contributing to investments in combating desertification and land degradation, in improved technology and technology transfer and in rural development.

Traditional knowledge

Utilizing traditional and indigenous knowledge, particularly in natural resources management, has proven to be an effective way in dealing with problems associated with desertification and land degradation at the local and household levels.

Education and awareness-raising

Education is an important tool for awareness-raising on issues related to desertification and land degradation and a better understanding of the desertification-poverty-development nexus. Updating curricula for different levels of education and promoting frameworks for dialogue and advocacy are among the practical measures that can be undertaken in this regard.

Information and early warning

Information and early warning play a crucial role in awareness-raising and capacity-building. Well-functioning information and early warning systems allow effective management of risks associated with drought, desertification and land degradation, and climate change, and help build up resilience in affected countries.

Expression of thanks

Conference participants expressed their gratitude to the Government of the People's Republic of China and to the United Nations for successfully convening this International Conference, and to the Beijing municipality for the warm welcome extended to all participants.

Annex II to the letter dated 14 March 2008 from the Permanent Representative of China to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

Report of the International Conference on Combating Desertification

(22-24 January 2008, Beijing)

I. Introduction

1. The State Forestry Administration of the People's Republic of China and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, with support from the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Parks and Forestry, and the secretariat of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, jointly organized the International Conference on Combating Desertification, in Beijing, from 22-24 January 2008.

2. The Conference brought together some 240 participants from 55 countries and 40 United Nations organizations and international and regional institutions. Over 20 countries sent senior government officials to the Conference. Government decision makers, representatives of local authorities, scientific institutions and other groups of civil society actively participated in thematic discussions, sharing experiences, lessons learned and best practices in combating desertification in the broad context of sustainable development.

3. In addition to opening and closing plenary sessions, the Conference organized a number of thematic sessions for country presentations and interactive discussions. These thematic sessions were moderated by individual experts with practical experience and knowledge on the subject matter under consideration. Discussants were selected for each session to enrich discussions by sharing their perspectives and views on issues highlighted in country presentations.

4. The results of the Conference were captured in the "Beijing Statement on Combating Desertification and Promoting Sustainable Development". Participants agreed that the Statement, as orally amended,[a] will be forwarded to the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development, which will address the issue of desertification, along with agriculture, rural development, land, drought, and Africa, at its sixteenth session, in May 2008 at United Nations Headquarters in New York.

II. Plenary session: opening and ministerial statements

5. Minister JIA Zhibang, head of the State Forestry Administration, China, presided over the opening segment of the plenary session. Vice-Minister ZHU Lieke of the State Forestry Administration presided over the segment for Ministerial statements.

6. HUI Liangyu, Vice-Premier of the State Council, addressing the opening of the Conference, emphasized the importance of full implementation of the United

[a] www.un.org/esa/sustdev/sdissues/desertification/beijing2008/index.htm.

Nations Conference to Combat Desertification and the need for formulation and implementation of national programmes for combating desertification and their integration into overall national sustainable development strategies. Implementation of national action programmes should be based on integrated approaches and supported by legislation. He underlined the need for improving the mode of economic growth and means of production and consumption to achieve harmony between conservation and development, as well as balance between economic and social benefits.

7. SHA Zukang, Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, delivered the message the Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, had addressed to the Conference. In his message, the Secretary-General made clear that desertification and land degradation were a complex global challenge with long-term social, economic and environmental implications. He noted that the impact of desertification is intensifying owing to climate change. He emphasized that the International Conference offered a timely opportunity for combating climate change and achieving sustainable development in areas affected by desertification and land degradation. The United Nations Conference to Combat Desertification offers a platform for adaptation, mitigation and resilience.

8. In his remarks, the Under-Secretary-General highlighted the desertification-poverty nexus, pointing out that the great majority of the countries ranked "low" on the human development index are suffering from drought and desertification. The average infant mortality rate for those countries is 10 times higher when compared with the average infant mortality rate in developed countries. Their per capita income is also among the lowest in the world. The Under-Secretary-General called upon the international community to act quickly to stop that scourge from continuing, afflicting millions of people in countries affected by desertification and land degradation.

9. Minister Francis Nhema, Chairman of the sixteenth session of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development, highlighted the desertification challenge facing the African region. He warned that more than half of all cultivated agricultural land in Africa could be unusable by the year 2050 if land degradation continues at the current pace, with grave negative impacts on food production and food security. Given the cross-cutting nature of desertification, he called for strengthening coordination among all governmental entities responsible for combating desertification. He underscored the global co-benefits of country-led initiatives to combat desertification and land degradation. Such initiatives will contribute to the safeguarding of the global life-supporting ecosystems.

10. In his remarks, Luc Gnacadja, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Conference to Combat Desertification, highlighted the Ten-Year Strategic Plan adopted at the eighth session of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention, which provided an overall strategic framework for advancing the implementation of the Convention.

11. Minister Andre de Jesus Moda (Angola), Ambassador Marjan Cencen (Slovenia), Ambassador Daniel Carmon (Israel), Ricardo Larriera (Argentina), Changchui He (Assistant Director-General and Regional Representative for Asia and the Pacific, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations), Bakary Kante (Director, United Nations Environment Programme), Tiega Anada (Secretary-General of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands), and Kunhamboo Kannan

(Director, Agriculture, Environment and Natural Resources Division, Asian Development Bank) also addressed the opening of the Conference. Yasuyuki Aoshima (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Representative in China and Director of UNESCO Office in Beijing) made an opening statement on behalf of Koichiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO.

12. Among other priority issues, the opening statements highlighted the strong interlinkages between desertification and sustainable development and the need for addressing desertification and land degradation as complex challenges with long-term social, economic and environmental implications. Combating desertification must be a key component of the global sustainable development agenda. Speakers also highlighted country-led actions, as well as initiatives undertaken by United Nations organizations and international and regional development institutions.

III. Thematic discussions

13. The Conference organized a number of thematic sessions for country presentations on barriers and constraints, lessons learned and best practices. The sessions addressed challenges of desertification in their social, economic and ecosystems dimensions, as well as scientific, technological, social, economic and financial measures to combat desertification and land degradation. A specific session was dedicated to issues related to multi-stakeholder participation to examine the role of local governments and major groups, including non-governmental organizations.

14. Through country presentations and interactive discussions, participants gained an improved understanding of the global dimensions of the challenges in combating desertification and land degradation and the measures taken to meet those challenges. They also illustrated the intricate interplay of ecosystems, and social and economic factors of desertification and land degradation. They agreed that combating desertification is crucial for achieving progress in poverty eradication, food security, economic development and socio-economic stability in affected countries and regions and contributes to global eco-safety.

15. There was broad recognition among participants that developing countries are confronted with institutional, financial, technological, and capacity constraints and — in some cases — sociocultural barriers. Thus, the variety of approaches, strategies and initiatives undertaken to overcome the barriers and constraints that emerged from presentations and interactive discussions provided an invaluable source of information and lessons learned.

A. Challenges of desertification: barriers and constraints

16. Country presentations and interactive discussions allowed for specific reviews of the challenges and constraints that countries face in combating desertification and land degradation. Clearly, Africa is one region that is facing a critical challenge in desertification and land degradation, with as much as two thirds of African land already degraded to some degree. Land degradation affects at least 485 million people or 65 per cent of the entire African population. The biggest impact of

desertification is on agriculture, affecting the continent's food production and food security.

17. The situation in Asia is also cause for concern. Out of a total land area of 4.3 billion hectares, Asia contains some 1.7 billion hectares of dry, semi-arid, and arid land, reaching from the Mediterranean to the Pacific. In Central Asia, nearly all countries in this subregion have been hit by land degradation and desertification.

18. In Latin America and the Caribbean, despite the world-renowned rainforests, about one quarter of the land is affected by desertification. Deforestation, overgrazing, and salinization have aggravated desertification and land degradation; and soil erosion is getting worse in many East Caribbean islands. A presentation made by Jamaica, for example, showcased the unique challenge faced by small island developing States in combating land degradation, in particular their vulnerability to environmental degradation, climate change, drought and natural disasters.

19. Case studies from Spain and some Eastern European countries illustrated that desertification is not a problem of developing countries alone, but occurs in industrialized countries as well. Combating desertification needs the commitment and cooperation of the international community as a whole.

20. Many challenges addressed in country-specific presentations are often those faced by countries of the same region. The presenters from Burkina Faso and Ethiopia, for example, noted that rural poverty continues to be the overarching challenge in countries and subregions of Africa affected by desertification and drought.

21. Participants underlined the serious negative impacts of desertification, land degradation and drought on agricultural production and food security. They noted with concern that unsustainable cultivation of croplands, overgrazing of rangelands, loss of forests and vegetation cover and soil erosion pose major challenges to dryland ecosystems and are among the main causes of desertification and land degradation. Presentations by participants from China, Ethiopia, Egypt, Pakistan and several others demonstrated that unsustainable cultivation methods and overgrazing have resulted in dramatic changes in the natural vegetation cover, heavy losses of top soil and considerable soil nutrient depletion, which has in some cases contributed to the spreading of desertification.

22. It was also noted that land tenure practices and policies that do not allow control of land by farmers and land owners, or that do not afford long-term tenure security, could lead to overexploitation of land resources, competition among different land users, and intra- and inter-group conflicts or conflicts for transboundary or shared resources.

23. Presentations made by participants from the secretariat of the United Nations Forum on Forests and the secretariat of the United Nations Conference to Combat Desertification referred to the consequences of deforestation on ecosystems, which include loss of top soil and biodiversity, drinking water contamination, destruction of watersheds, and worsening of coastal environments.

24. A number of presentations emphasized the interlinkages between desertification and climate change. Desertification affects global climate change through soil and vegetation losses. Dryland soils contain over a quarter of all the

organic carbon stores in the world as well as nearly all the inorganic carbon. Unimpeded desertification and land degradation may release a major fraction of that carbon to the global atmosphere, with significant feedback consequences to the global climate system. Conversely, climate change may adversely affect biodiversity and exacerbate desertification risks in many areas owing to increases in evapotranspiration and a likely decrease in rainfall in drylands.

25. In that regard, participants pointed out that country-led initiatives to combat desertification and land degradation not only contribute to poverty eradication and sustainable development in affected developing countries, they have long-term global co-benefits. Reforestation, regeneration of natural vegetation, reduction of emissions of carbon dioxide from soil, water and soil conservation, biodiversity preservation and environment protection — they all make significant contributions to the safeguarding of the global life-supporting ecosystems.

B. Measures to combat desertification: lessons learned and best practices

26. Participants learned of national and regional experience gained with coping strategies and measures that have been put in place to address the various barriers and constraints to desertification and land degradation. In many cases, those measures have generated success stories and best practices.

27. Many country presentations, such as those given by China and India, highlighted various measures taken by Governments, local authorities and community groups to roll back desertification and land degradation. Despite the differences in national approaches due to country-specific circumstances, participants noted that successful strategies share a number of actions in common. Legislation plays a crucial role in mobilizing political will; sustained progress depends on institution- and capacity-building; national action programmes should be integrated into relevant national development strategies and investment frameworks; and there need to be dedicated budget allocations for programmes to combat desertification and land degradation.

28. Participants acknowledged the role that Governments and their development partners have played in creating an enabling environment for combating desertification and land degradation. It was, however, also felt that national strategies and action plans to cope with desertification, land degradation and drought in many instances fell short of fully addressing the social and economic dimensions.

29. In that regard, a number of interventions emphasized the importance of promoting integrated land and water management plans and methods that prevent and reduce overgrazing and overexploitation of land and forest resources. Others highlighted the need for providing incentives to stakeholders to invest in sustainable land management through improving tenure security and access rights to land, water, forest and other natural resources. When farmers and herders gain control or long-term security over the land they use, they will be encouraged to invest in land productivity and more sustainable soil and water management since they would be able to reap the future rewards of such investments.

30. Successful results of governments' long-term commitment and investment in combating desertification show that combating desertification requires adopting a multisector approach, involving all relevant government agencies at the central and local levels. Coordination across government entities and between central and local governments is thus crucial to progress in slowing down, rolling back and preventing desertification and land degradation.

31. Strategic alliances can play an important role in the process of developing and implementing national action programmes to combat desertification, as illustrated in the presentations from Argentina and Thailand. It was pointed out that applying a participatory and bottom-up ownership approach and providing opportunities for enhancing cooperation for capacity-building and financial and technical support were among the main lessons learned in establishing strategic alliances.

32. Participation of local communities and local stakeholders in the efforts to combat desertification and land degradation is crucial to successful utilization of traditional knowledge that local communities have accumulated in their interaction with nature over time. Building on traditional knowledge, experiences and best practices has proven to be effective in dealing with problems associated with desertification at the local and household levels. In that regard, the presenters from Indonesia and Peru shared their experiences with initiatives to combat desertification and land degradation that are community-based, that build upon local knowledge, use local inputs and directly respond to local needs.

33. In addressing the financial constraint faced by many developing countries in combating desertification, participants emphasized the need for adopting a comprehensive strategy for resource mobilization. The strategy works best if based on multi-stakeholder participation and partnership, supported by international development cooperation partners, and is properly reflected in national budgeting and development cooperation frameworks.

34. A number of presentations and interventions addressed the rationale for investing in dryland areas. They highlighted the importance of creating economic incentives for promoting sustainable land management in drylands and illustrated examples of the multisectoral approaches adopted in various countries to achieve that objective, for example, by subsidizing income-generation activities, promoting agricultural diversification and harnessing the economic potential of dryland ecosystems.

35. Promoting market access for farmers to enable them to sell their products was considered crucial to their long-term prosperity. So was providing them with capacity-building so that they can adopt new and improved technologies and sustainable farming practices. Those support measures will be all the more effective when carried out through international cooperation as well as public and private partnerships formed to facilitate technology transfer.

36. Participants further emphasized the importance of sharing knowledge, experience and best practices, through, for example, the use of information networks and early warning systems. Capacity-building, education and awareness-raising on the challenges of desertification, land degradation and drought and their interlinkages with society could contribute to a better understanding of the desertification-poverty-development nexus and to informed decision-making.

37. Participants underlined the need to promote awareness of the impacts of climate change on desertification. Equally important is the need to build the capacity of farming communities to cope with the impacts of climate change on land and agriculture. Weather and climate information and early warning systems can play an important role in that regard. Also, the adoption of sound mitigation and adaptation policies can reduce the vulnerability of the farming community and risks associated with climate change impacts.

38. A number of presentations highlighted the important role of the United Nations Conference to Combat Desertification in combating desertification and climate change and the need for strengthening synergies among the three Rio Conventions, the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands and other international agreements such as the "Non-legally binding instrument on all types of forests" adopted by the General Assembly in resolution 62/98.

39. Several presentations specifically acknowledged the valuable contributions provided by the bilateral and multilateral development partners, including the Asian Development Bank, the Global Environment Facility, International Fund for Agricultural Development, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the World Bank, particularly in terms of technical and financial assistance. Some of them have taken the role of lead agency, which carries with it a number of significant technical and financial commitments. It was felt that the international community should further encourage and support countries in their efforts to mainstream programmes to combat desertification and land degradation into broader national planning and budgeting frameworks, so that they can fully benefit from new modalities of aid allocation and from new financial instruments such as the Global Mechanism.

40. A number of presentations acknowledged the support provided by the Global Mechanism both in the elaboration of national and subregional action programmes, and in the establishment of partnership platforms to facilitate resource mobilization for sustainable land management programmes, such as in the Caribbean and in Central Asia. The Global Mechanism can make a valuable contribution in assisting countries in the development of integrated financing strategies.

41. Several speakers recalled the importance of the Ten-Year Strategic Plan adopted at the eighth session of the Conference of the Parties to United Nations Conference to Combat Desertification. It enables the Convention to be more broadly engaged on the frontline of combating desertification and land degradation, mitigating the effects of drought, as well as contributing to combating climate change. In that respect, the Convention serves as a platform for adaptation to climate change, mitigation and resilience.

C. Multi-stakeholder participation

42. Several presentations, including one by FAO, illustrated how local governments, farming communities, central Governments and international organizations, can work together in desertification control. In China, for example, desertification control projects implemented under the responsibility of the government of the Ningxia province, with the support of the central Government and development assistance partners, have resulted in the restoration of ecosystem services and the improvement of the livelihoods of farmers. Policies have been

guided by the principle of "who takes care of the land, will own and benefit from the land". Combining desertification control with income-generation has been encouraged. By means of shrub fodder processing, food production and herbal medicine cultivation, farmers achieve higher incomes and become more actively involved in desertification control.

43. Voluntary, multi-stakeholder partnerships thus can be an important tool in delivering results on the ground. They have contributed to improving the effectiveness and impact of implementation by involving relevant stakeholders — Governments, civil society, local communities and the private sector so that they all have a stake in combating desertification and land degradation and in promoting sustainable agriculture and rural development.

44. The presentation by Iraq highlighted the high priority that the Government has given to combating desertification and land degradation and in promoting agricultural development, due to its importance for food production and income-generation. Considerable advances in the expansion and modernization of both irrigated and dryland farming have been made during the past few years to increase production and improve the life and income of rural populations. Building the capacity of local stakeholders in sustainable land use management has proven essential to their effective participation in combating desertification and land degradation.

IV. Summary and conclusion

45. The plenary session on the way forward was moderated by Luc Gnacadja, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Conference to Combat Desertification. Moderators of thematic sessions were invited to present a brief summary of their sessions, highlighting key points emerging from national presentations and interactive discussion with regard to the challenges of desertification, barriers and constraints impeding implementation, and policy options, and practical measures to advance progress in combating desertification.

46. In the discussions on the way forward, many participants emphasized the need for addressing desertification and land degradation in the context of sustainable development, linking desertification issues with agriculture, integrated land and water management, rural development, climate change and poverty eradication, etc. They expressed the view that the International Conference succeeded in complementing the work undertaken within the framework of the United Nations Conference to Combat Desertification. They expressed appreciation for the opportunity afforded by the Conference for exchanging national and regional experiences, identifying barriers and constraints, as well as for showcasing best practices.

47. In that regard, it was felt that while there was broad acknowledgement of desertification and land degradation as a global issue, and as an issue cutting across borders and economic and social sectors, participation by developed countries had been minimal. It was hoped that more active participation by developed countries in future such conferences would be encouraged and promoted.

48. Following summaries by moderators of thematic sessions, the co-organizers of the Conference introduced the draft "Beijing Statement on Combating

Desertification and Promoting Sustainable Development". Participants commented on the statement and proposed a few amendments. In addition to the opening paragraph, amendments were introduced to highlight the shared challenge of desertification and land degradation, the role of wetland ecosystems, and the importance of promoting technology transfers. Participants agreed that the Beijing Statement, as orally amended, will be forwarded to the Commission on Sustainable Development at its sixteenth session for broader dissemination.

49. The Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, Minister Francis Nhema, Chairman of the sixteenth session of the Commission on Sustainable Development, and Zhu Lie Ke, Vice-Minister of the State Forest Administration of China, made closing remarks.

50. At the conclusion of the closing session, conference participants expressed their gratitude to the Government of the People's Republic of China and to the United Nations for successfully convening the International Conference, and to the Beijing municipality for the warm welcome extended to all participants.